

The University of Chicago

SOCIAL EVOLUTION OF EARLY
DHARMA

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION
1938

By
SUNDER JOSHI

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A. Social Evolution and Types of Dharma

Behavior-patterns are relativistic, experimental and social. Dharma is a behavior-pattern. Its implications range from human conduct on the one hand to the so-called absolute on the other. The historico-social study of Dharmic evolution clearly shows the this-worldly and non-transcendental nature of the various early Dharmas of India. In the Rigvedic period the outlook was completely this-worldly. In the Upanishadic period there was a seeming rejection of the this-worldly attitude although the social-human substratum was continuous. In the Shastric period there was a return to earth. In keeping with these three cultural atmospheres, generic Dharma changed.

1. Rigvedic Period

When we turn to the specific types of Dharma during these three periods, we find the following picture. In the first period the fundamental Aryan Dharma represented the formulation of a racial hatred against those non-Aryans who did not follow the customs of the Aryan.¹ The former were considered as a dangerous element to the stability of Indo-Aryan society. The "behavior" of a man is what made him an Aryan. That was the Dharma of a man. Rita signified "right order."² Only that was "right" which was conducive to the continuity of Indo-Aryan society. This is Rita Dharma in its moral aspect. The Hindus have always universalized that which was "proper" in society. Thus there was cosmic Rita, in which there was not only "order," but "right" order. It was "right" because it was beneficial to social values. The next step in this sociological evolution took place when the god Varuna was

¹Rigveda I, 51, 8; 175, 3; VI, 14, 3; VIII, 70, 11; IX, 41, 2; X, 22, 8.

²Rigveda I, 1, 8; 2, 8; 124, 3. Also cf. E. W. Hopkins, Ethics of India (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1924), pp. 2 f.

made the custodian of Rita.¹ This was a significant step. Dharma now became divine and the breaking of a behavior pattern meant that man was transgressing not only human, but divine regulations. This was the social way which made the performance of duty, as laid down by society, rigidly obligatory. All through the Dharmas of this period ran the note of the social desire for the continuity of the group.² Social pressures, as expressed in the Aryan, Rita and divine Dharmas, increase at every step as we come to the end of the Rigvedic period.

2. Upanishadic Period

In the Upanishadic period, the Rigvedic element of "merit" was developed further.³ By sacrificing, one could store away "merit" in heaven.⁴ This idea was merely the human way of transferring to a state after death the human attitude of a sort of a bank-account, which bank-account could be drawn upon after death. In the Yajurveda this point of view was strengthened. The sacrifice became more important than the gods, because it satisfied the needs of men in a more satisfactory way than the gods. This was the Yajna or sacrificial Dharma. The Atharvaveda contributed mechanical ritual control. Magic was the coercive way to obtain desire-fulfillment. The Dharma of mechanical ritual control was the outcome of the amalgamation of both the Aryan and the non-Aryan ideals.⁵ The combination of sacrifice and magic, both of which were desire-fulfillment techniques, prepared the setting for the Brahmanas. The sacrificial technique now became thoroughly rigid, mechanical and coercive.⁶ The attitude that the sacrificial technique was the best method for guaranteeing individual and social values was reason enough to make the sacrificial or ritual Dharma the supreme behavior-pattern of the day. Concomi-

¹Rigveda I, 24, 10; II, 28, 5, 8 and 9; V, 65, 2; 67, 4; VII, 49, 3; 86, 5.

²Rigveda III, 51, 12; VII, 34, 23; 53, 3; 62, 5.

³Rigveda X, 14, 8.

⁴Satapatha Brahmana X, 1, 5, 4; XI, 2, 7, 33.

⁵S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1923), I, 118.

⁶Satapatha Brahmana II, 5, 3, 19.

tant with the crystallization of the priestly duties of the sacrificial kind,¹ the caste system was gradually established bringing caste Dharma in its wake.² The beginnings of Ashrama Dharma, which culminated in the Aranyakas, were also discerned here. The four Ashramas represented a social compromise between the Brahmanic way of works and the Kshatriya way of knowledge.³ Both of these ways were techniques of desire-fulfillment.

The next step came when the sacrificial technique of the Brahmanas began to show signs of failure in its functioning. Society now began to look for a substitute which would guarantee the desired values. The Kshatriyas or intellectuals found a solution in the "self" of man.⁴ The beginnings of the compromise between popular religion and the religion of the intellectuals were discerned in the Ashramas of the Aranyakas. But the reason for this compromise was the Brahmanic recognition of the importance of the Kshatriya Atmanic ideology. In this ideology there were two factors: namely, Brahman and Atman. Let us examine Brahman first.

a. Brahman the Absolute, a social creation

Brahman was originally synonymous with prayer in the Rigveda⁵ and with the power of sacrifice in the Brahmanas.⁶ Brahman

¹On account of the necessity of exactitude in the ritual, the Brahmanas are even raised to the status of gods. Taittiriya Samhita I, 7, 3, 1.

²Satapatha Brahmana V, 5, 4, 9; VI, 4, 4, 13. Aitareya Brahmana VII, 19, 1. Also, Satapatha Brahmana I, 1, 4, 12; III, 1, 1, 10. Brhadaranyaka Upanishad I, 2, 27.

³M. Winternitz, A History of Indian Literature, trans. Mrs. S. Ketkar (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1927), I, 232 ff. Also cf. S. K. Belvalkar and R. D. Ranade, History of Indian Philosophy (Poona: Bilvakunja Publishing House, 1927), II, 84.

⁴Infra, p. 5, n. 1, where the reasons for this transition are given.

⁵Brahmanaspati is the lord of prayer. Another name for the same is Brihaspati. Rigveda I, 18, 1; I, 40; II, 23-26.

⁶The sacrifice is Brahman (Sat. Brah. III, 1, 4, 15); Brahman is the heart of the sacrifice (Sat. Brah. XII, 8, 2, 23); Sacrifice is all-sustaining (Sat. Brah. IX, 2, 3, 27); Brahman is the foundation of everything (Sat. Brah. VI, 1, 1, 8); Prajapati is Brahman (Sat. Brah. VII, 3, 1, 42); Prajapati is the embryo or power of the sacrifice (Sat. Brah. III, 2, 1, 11).

was both an old technique for the actualization of desire and the desired social value itself. Since the power of sacrifice or Brahman produced all that was desired, and since this covered the entire universe in scope, it was easily understood how, from a social point of view, the universe was produced from Brahman. The Hindus once again universalized that which was valuable to society. And so Brahman was objectified. Brahman now became the absolute. We submit that the entire biography of this so-called absolute or Brahman represented the evolution of the desires and values of the group.¹ It may be recalled that through the Rig-vedic period, Brahman was an actualization technique (prayer). In the Brahmanas, it was recognized not only as an actualization technique but also as the desired social value itself. It is obvious that this entire evolution of Brahman belonged to the priestly or Brahman tradition.² There was, however, another factor which cooperated in the objectification of Brahman (absolute). This other factor or Atman belonged to the Kshatriya tradition.³ When the Atman doctrine was recognized by the priests, orthodoxy became infused with heterodoxy. The result was the identification of Atman with Brahman.⁴ This identification was the culmination of two traditions, and represented the basic doctrine of the Upanishads. Before Brahman reached such cosmic heights, however, the Kshatriya Atman had already grown to imposing proportions. In fact, it was on account of the importance of the Atman that the priests threw the blanket of orthodoxy over it. It was this social compromise which resulted in the magnifying of Brahman to the ultimate metaphysical position that it finally did reach. It is apparent from this whole discussion that Atman's final stage, as we find it in the Upanishads, was reached before Brahman's

¹From the various functions allotted to Brahman and Prajapati (and they are one and the same) in the preceding note, it is clear that all through the passages desire-fulfillment is basic.

²This is brought out by the fundamental meanings of Brahman as "priest" (Rigveda II, 39, 1; VIII, 7, 20), prayer and power of sacrifice. Supra, p. 3, n. 5 and n. 6.

³Brhadaranyaka Upanishad II, 1, 1; VI, 1, 1. Kausitaki Upanishad IV, 1. Chandogya Upanishad V, 3, 1. Satapatha Brahmana XI, 6, 2, 1-10.

⁴It seems that trance experiences of the meditating seers constituted an important factor in this identification. Brhadaranyaka Upanishad IV, 3, 22.

metaphysical peak. If this were not so, the priests would not have recognized Atman. Let us now turn to an examination of Atman.

b. Atman, an experiential product

New doctrines arise as an answer to the challenge of the times. When the sacrificial technique of the Brahmanas failed to obtain the desired values of the group, the Kshatriyas looked elsewhere for a solution. They found this solution in the Atman or the "self" of man.¹ Another social, and more psychological, reason for looking inward for a solution was the fact that the entire life of man was pervaded with Karma. Life was full of sorrow and impermanence. In fact, "change" or "transiency" involved sorrow. If one could find a solution for change, then sorrow could be curbed.² It was in the changeless "I" behind all experiential change that a solution was found.³ This solution was free from change. The question may be asked as to how the philosopher arrived at the changeless "I" in the first place. It may be answered that, philologically, Atman meant "breath." The difference between life and death signified either the presence or absence of breath. Breath was thus regarded as the essence of life. It was this breath, life or soul, which was present behind all change. Thus the element of "changelessness" in the individual became the new ideal. The soul was the custodian of this changelessness. Atman also means soul. In order that this new ideal could become "binding" upon the people as the great solution of the day, Atman was universalized.⁴ The changelessness in the individual "I" was

¹The transition from the sacrificial technique of the Brahmanas to the Kshatriya "self" was also due to the following facts: (a) The pitryana heaven was only temporary, (b) the gods were powerless because they were also on the Wheel, (c) karma and re-birth meant endless immortality, (d) life itself was a perpetual momentariness and was filled with sorrow, (e) asceticism seemed to point to a deeper reality.

²Chandogya Upanishad VIII, 7, 3, where Atman, the self, is ageless, deathless, sorrowless and so forth.

³Chandogya Upanishad VIII, 10, 1 and 3.

⁴Since man found satisfaction in the permanent human "I" or Atman in this world, there was every reason to make it cosmic. Brhadaranyka Upanishad I, 4, 15 and 16 says that the world of the self is complete and that this world can create whatsoever one desires. Also, Chandogya Upanishad VIII, 2.

now magnified to the changelessness of the cosmic "I". And thus the "self" of man was objectified to cosmic proportions. Whenever a social value was greatly esteemed, the Hindus made it cosmic. One last step remained. This universalized Atman was identified with Brahman.¹ In the identification of Atman with Brahman, the individual self not only became cosmic but also undertook, from a social point of view, the social functions and values which had previously been assigned to Brahman in its historical rise to the position of the metaphysical absolute.² We submit that, logically, man may well be called the creator of the world. This Atmanic Dharma of the Upanishads was the culmination of desire-fulfillment. Man was told that he is the absolute, "Tat twam asi."

The general conclusion from this entire argument as given in the above paragraphs (a) and (b) is: Every step in the whole evolution of Brahman, the so-called absolute, is surcharged with human and social ambition. Brahman is a social creation. It is the idealization of that which the group "wants." Atman is individual desire "cosmified," because that desire met with material frustrations here and now. Atman, then, is only a product of human experience. The Brahman-Atman identification represents the human hope that at the end of the temporal trail, there must be a refuge. Frustrated human hope can, at least, dare to aspire for the fulfillment of those unfulfilled desires, even beyond the frontiers of death. Atmanic Dharma is the actualization-technique of this daring hope.

3. Shastric Period

The Shastric period represented the fact that the way of works finally triumphed over the way of knowledge. Here we find that custom became law. The ideal was the salvation of society, not merely of the individual. In the Grihya Sutras the householder's Dharma was recognized as symbolic of the superiority of the this-worldly life.³ In the Manava Dharma Shashtra, behavior-

¹Brhadaranyaka Upanishad V, 15. Isa Upanishad XVI. Chandogya Upanishad I, 7, 5. Taaittiriya Upanishad II, 8.

²On the other hand, Brahman is not only the old cosmic-creator principle but is now endowed with a consciousness similar to the individual self. Brhadaranyaka Upanishad III, 4, 1.

³Manu goes a step further when he says that the house-

patterns were established in all walks of life so that man might secure the greatest possible social values. Desire or Kama constituted the basic human drive.¹ Artha or well-being (in the larger sense) represented the end of human striving.² Varnashrama Dharma was the technique for the actualization of the values cherished by man and society alike. In Kautilya's Artha Shastra, it became the king's Dharma to see that all the individual Dharmas of men (or Manava Dharma) were executed to the best of each person's ability.³

It is obvious that with every transition in the techniques of desire-fulfillment, new Dharmas or behavior-patterns came into existence. This was proof of the fact that man was eternally questing for the more abundant life. His Dharmas changed with his actualization techniques. These techniques changed with every changing cultural and social setting or back-ground. The relativity of moral codes is fully brought to light. With changing customs, we witness changing Dharmas.

B. Philosophy of Dharma

Hinduism has never shifted its emphasis from the philosophy that Dharma is the law of one's being. Dharma originates from the Sanskrit root "Dhar" (to hold), that is, the "holding" of the law of one's being within the pattern established by society. To burn is the nature of fire. Similarly, to obey a behavior-pattern or Dharma is the nature of man.

Dharma is what a man does at the proper time, in the proper place, in the proper way, in accordance with his status in life, family and society. A Hindu goes from his cradle to his grave with hardly a moment when one Dharma or another is not operating. The performance of one's duty is imperative. In this life any transgression of Dharma will be punished by society and by the state. If one escapes punishment from these agencies there is al-

holder's order is superior to the other three ashrama orders. Laws of Manu III, 77 and 78; VI, 89.

¹Laws of Manu II, 2-4 inclusive.

²Manu says that the integration of kama, artha and dharma is essential to the complete life. Laws of Manu II, 224.

³Kautilya Artha Shastra Bk. I, chap. III, 8.

ways another incarnation and a man pays then for what he has done here and now. This is the human way of projecting justice beyond the frontiers of this life. The "moral imperative" to obey social regulations rests in this extraordinary device of human creation. The combination of Dharma and Karma is a social method, par excellence, for preserving the stability of society by forcing every man, at every stage of his life, in every possible relationship, to follow a course of conduct in keeping with the most cherished individual and social values.

C. Meanings of Dharma

As the activities of men cover all walks of life, it is easy to see how Dharma was identified with behavior-pattern, conduct, virtue, duty, obligation, function, custom, law, tradition, Karma, god, the absolute and the ideal. All these aspects of Dharma are representative of the various ways by which man has striven to secure desire-fulfillment through the philosophy of action. A Hindu is, what he does.

